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Immigrant Children Crisis Involves Many Nations

by Barbara Loach

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(Introduction: Why are so many unaccompanied Mexican and Central American children showing up in the US? What should be done about them? The thesis of this article is that this crisis shows that illegal immigration is not a domestic issue; it is an international issue that must be addressed by cooperation of all nations involved.)

Number of Immigrants from Central America on the Rise

According to the Department of Homeland Security, while illegal immigration to the US fell drastically in the years 2005-2010 due in large part to the economic crisis of 2008 and its after effects, illegal immigration from Central America increased 50% (from two million to three million) between the years 2000-2010. The exodus from the so-called “Northern Triangle” of three countries to the immediate south and east of Mexico—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—has been driven not by economic factors so much as by social and political forces: specifically, the increased violence caused by gangs and drug cartels operating in the region.

What is perceived as the current crisis of unaccompanied children arriving illegally in the US has actually been going on unnoticed for several years. According to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, an average of 6,800 Central American children entered the US each year between 2004 and 2011; in 2012 the number was 13,000; in 2013, 24,000; and projections indicate that the number could skyrocket to 60,000 by the end of this year (2014).

How and why are so many unaccompanied children coming to the US? The answers are complex and many and experts have set forth a number of theories. In the end, the one commonality in all the theories is marked by the essence of simplicity: parents want their children with them.

Family Reunification as Motivating Factor

The impression that the current crisis involves children who “just show up” on their own is not a valid one. The reality is that Central American coyotes or traffickers have discovered a booming business in transporting children to the US for parents willing to pay the price. Ironically, it is because of the success of the undocumented workers who have managed to find steady work and save the thousands of dollars needed to pay the coyote that has intensified the situation.

These parents are not naïve to think that once their child arrives on US soil that he or she will attain citizenship or even a deferred deportation; they understand that the Obama executive order to defer deportation of minor children of undocumented workers does not apply to them. But given the circumstances in their home countries and the seeming impossibility of legal immigration, they see no other solution than to pay the coyote the \$5000-7000 to safely bring their child to the border and think about the consequences later (Oscar Martinez, “The Northern Triangle Children Don’t Leave Alone: They are Taken” 16 July 2014, www.insightcrime.org).

Dire Conditions in Central America as Results of US Policies

The two main threats in the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador come from the increasing power of organized crime youth gangs and drug cartels. Again, the level of violence that exists in these countries is not a new phenomenon: it has been a fact of life for decades. Unfortunately, these threats to Central American societies are partly a result of US government policies.

In the 1980's when the United States assisted the Colombian government to wage war against the drug cartels, those cartels moved into Mexico; in the 2000's when the US government pressured the Mexican government to wage war against the cartels, the cartels then expanded their operations into Central American countries (Ted Carpenter, "Drug Cartels Are Causing a Refugee Crisis," CNN World 10 July 2014).

The youth gangs terrorizing these countries are also an export from the United States. In the 1990's the Immigration and Naturalization Service rounded up the worst Latin gang members in Los Angeles and deported them to Central America. With the experience and knowledge they had learned on the streets of LA, they were prime candidates to take over the Central American towns where they ended up (Brianna Lee, "US Deportation Policies Have Close Ties to Central American Violence," International Business Times, 14 July 2014).

The gangs, known as "maras," are especially strong in El Salvador, where they are responsible for almost half of the homicides in the country. In Honduras, since the overthrow of the president in 2009—a move backed by the United States government—organized crime filled the authority vacuum left by disputes over who was the constitutionally-recognized ruler of the country. Honduras currently has the highest homicide rate of any country in the world: 90.4 murders per 100,000; El Salvador is fourth in the world at 41.2 per 100,000, and Guatemala is fifth at 39.9 in 2012 (Charlotte Alfred, "These 10 Countries Have the World's Highest Murder Rates," *The Huffington Post*, 10 April 2014). By contrast, the homicide rate in the US in 2012 was 4.9 per 100,000.

Need for Change in US Policies

Behind the socio-economic factors described above, there lie political factors that aggravate the immigration crisis. In the United States, three key factors center on: 1) the lack of an immigration policy that would recognize economic refugees and establish a guest worker program; 2) special interest groups who profit from the current status of immigration non/enforcement; and 3) the reticence of politicians to touch the "third rail" of immigration reform in any given election cycle.

The scene of hundreds of children in detention facilities at the US border is unsettling for many reasons. But legal procedures put in place during the George W. Bush administration have control over how these children must be dealt with. Once in the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (2008) stipulates that undocumented children must have a preliminary hearing to determine if they are eligible for asylum (as victims of trafficking); it also stipulates that they cannot be incarcerated in the same way or for the same extended length of time as adults. Border Patrol agents must take the children to special shelters belonging to the Department of Health within 72 hours of apprehension; once that department identifies family members for the child, the child is released to them regardless of his or her legal status. Before the child can return for a second hearing, it is likely that the parents or relatives have

taken the child and “moved on” because they fear that the child will be eventually deported back to the home country.

Economic Refugee Status Does Not Exist

Currently, the United States grants refugee status to only those who “have a well-founded fear” of persecution for religious or political beliefs; asylum is granted only to those individuals who can document that returning to their home country would result in incarceration or death. No country on earth recognizes the status of “economic refugees,” those people who have a “well-founded fear” of suffering or deprivation or death due to starvation because of severe economic conditions in their country. Many immigrants who enter the US would fall into such a category; they do not necessarily want “amnesty and a path to citizenship;” they merely want the opportunity to improve their economic standing so they can improve their standard of living, usually back in their own homeland.

Additional Factors That Contribute to Immigration Crisis

In Mexico and Central America, the tradition of corrupt governments is a perennial barrier to any kind of social or economic reform that would bring stability to those nations and stem the tide of migration. Both El Salvador and Guatemala do have laws against child trafficking and monitor their borders for children travelling with adults who are not family members, but it is easy for coyotes to use falsified documents or pay bribes in order to get across.

Well-known special interest groups in the US that influence immigration policy include agribusiness mega-farms and the construction industry which depend on immigrant labor; more sinister is the burgeoning prison industry in the US which would profit from building additional detention centers and other facilities to house undocumented immigrants (Laura Sullivan, “Prison Economics Help Drive Ariz. Immigration Law,” NPR, 28 October 2010).

Politicians are reticent to touch the issue of immigration reform for a number of reasons; conservative constituents who are ardent “pro-American” are much more vocal than constituents who advocate comprehensive immigration reform. The afore-mentioned lobbying groups also exert significant persuasive pressure to compel politicians to maintain the “status quo” of a broken immigration policy.

Future Directions

Now President Obama is asking Congress for \$3.7 billion dollars to address the crisis. The bulk of the money will go to building detention centers and increasing border security and only about 8% will go to the governments of the Northern Triangle countries to help them address the underlying economic and security issues in their homelands. Given the fact that the current crisis exists even though last year spending for US Customs and Border Protection and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement exceeded spending for all other federal criminal law enforcement agencies *combined*, the success of increased spending to secure the border is dubious at best (Doris Meissner et al., “Immigration Enforcement in the United States: The Rise of a Formidable Machinery,” Migration Policy Institute, January 2013).

Also, if history repeats itself, very little of that money designated for foreign governments will ever end up in the hands of the people who most need it. Before that money is handed over to those governments,

it would behoove the Obama administration to consult with the leaders of those nations to find out exactly what are the most urgent needs and underlying causes; providentially, President Obama has invited leaders from these Central American countries to attend a meeting in Washington before the end of the month. A more viable alternative, however, would be to entrust the money to reliable non-governmental and religious organizations already working in those countries because they are more familiar with the needs and opportunities for development at the local level and are more accountable to their support bases.

Call for International Cooperation

The plight of thousands of displaced children sitting in detention centers in the US disturbs even the most callous heart; but to find a solution, reason and integrity must prevail over hysteria, blame-casting and expediency. The current crisis is a dire symptom of the failed economic and political policies of all the nations involved; consequently, all the nations involved must accept responsibility for the problem and work together to alleviate the root causes of this mass exodus of desperate people.

Sources and for additional reading:

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